



BEYOND THE DINNER TABLE

Five *Different* Ways to Spend Quality Time with Your Kids

Holding your newborn baby in your arms, you'd never guess that she'd be off to kindergarten in the blink of an eye and then, before you know it, asking to borrow the car. Yet that's how parents often describe the years they've spent raising children. Time flies, and your growing child will never again be the age she is today. But if your life is jam-packed with work, school, extra-curricular activities and other obligations, finding time to really know and nurture your child can be challenging.

Eating dinner together is a frequently recommended strategy, and studies suggest that families who regularly have dinner together are better connected and healthier in many ways¹. And while it's a wonderful start, it's not the only way to make time for children. Here are five simple suggestions for fitting quality time with your kids into your busy life.

READ

Kids love being read to, from before they can talk until long after they can read on their own, and it helps them grow into good readers and learners. Make reading together the last part of your child's bedtime routine. Even five or 10 minutes is worthwhile (shoot for 20-30), and chances are reading will help them wind down and fall asleep more quickly.

WORK

Find a regular chore that is usually done alone and make it a job for two, and in most cases you'll get the job done faster while building camaraderie. If your "helper" is very young, it might actually take a bit *longer* to complete the job, but you'll still impart the values of responsibility and cooperation. Whether your helper is a chatty kindergartener or a monosyllabic teen, working as a team can bring you closer together.

PLAY

Share a sport, exercise or hobby you love with your kids – or try *their* favorite activity. When you hit on something you both enjoy, make it a regular part of your lifestyle by scheduling it in. Get out your day-planner and pencil in morning walks, a parent-child class at the local Y, or weekly one-on-one games.

WRITE

This may sound like cheating, since it doesn't actually involve spending time *with* your child. But people often express themselves more freely in writing, or show a different side of their personality. Exchanging letters with your kids can profoundly enrich your relationship, and with email you can do it in just five minutes a day. Try it and see what happens!

SPLURGE

What's your son's favorite flavor of ice cream? Is there a movie your teenager is dying to see? Surprise your child with an occasional, spur-of-the-moment treat by taking a detour from a routine errand. The *real* treat isn't the ice cream cone or movie ticket, of course; it's the unplanned, leisurely time your child gets hanging out with you.

¹ Tarkan, Laurie. "Benefits of the dinner table ritual." *New York Times*, May 3, 2005. Accessed May 8, 2007 at <http://www.bridges4kids.org/articles/7-05/NYTimes5-3-05.html>.

WORTH EVERY MINUTE

You don't want to miss out on the delight, insight and wonder of any stage of your child's development – and she needs you through the difficult times, too. So make time with your children a priority whatever their age. Yes, your life as a parent is busy. But it's also short. You and your child both deserve an enriching parent-child relationship, with plenty of space and time for communicating unhurriedly, coping with challenges, discovering, and simply enjoying each other's company.

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